

# Should Women Be Pastors and Elders?

In our society of rapid change, the church is changing too. Some of this change is for the good and some of it is “conforming to the patterns of this world” (Romans 12:1). The question I wish to address is: “Should women be pastor’s and elders?”, that is “Should women be spiritual leaders over men?” In the history of the church, with few exceptions, the answer to this question has been “no” up to the present century. This question is not a debate between liberals and evangelicals, though the majority of the liberals would answer in the affirmative. There are many conservative Evangelicals who embrace both sides. The leading writers on this subject would include: Craig Keener<sup>1</sup> and Gordon Fee<sup>2</sup> on the side allowing women as pastors and elders, and John Piper and Wayne Grudem<sup>3</sup> on the side opposed to women as pastors and elders. Because there are differences of opinion on this subject by highly respected Evangelical scholars it is wise to approach this subject with humility and grace. Even if we disagree, unity and respect should be maintained in the Body of Christ concerning this subject. Because as Evangelicals the Word of God is our supreme authority, both positions will be evaluated according to its faithfulness to the Bible. I will briefly set out the variations of both positions by discussing the two most important passages that concern this question: 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-36.

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<sup>1</sup>Craig Keener, Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul (Grand Rapids: Baker Books).

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Fee, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus: New International Commentary (Peabody Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>John Piper and Wayne Grudem, editors, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism (Crossway Books, 1991).





1 Timothy 2:11-14 reads:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. Those who argue that women can be pastors and elders interpret this passage in two major ways:

1) Some say this passage is not universal for all time, but rather should be interpreted as cultural for the first century Christians only. The passage just before this says women shouldn't braid their hair or wear jewelry (1 Timothy 2:9-11). Keener says, "Most Jewish teachers allowed wives to adorn themselves for their husbands, but both Jewish and Greco-Roman moralists ridiculed women who decked themselves out to turn other men's eyes."<sup>4</sup> Paul was accommodating to his culture so as to not hinder the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). We know this prohibition of jewelry was a cultural accommodation because God himself used jewelry for his bride (Ezekiel 16:9-13). So, the argument says that since our passage in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 is in the context of cultural accommodation it too should be interpreted as cultural. At that time women were looked down on. In the freedom Paul gave by announcing Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," some women took it too far for that time period and were hindering the gospel by teaching and taking authority over men. In our own day it is perfectly acceptable to have women teaching and having authority over men and so this passage doesn't apply today.

2) The second view of those who believe woman can be pastors and elders is that there is a mistranslation of this passage. In this passage the word translated "man" is *avndroj*, and the word translated "woman" is *gunaiki*. These words can also be translated "husband" and "wife." If this is a correct translation, then the passage would only be forbidding wives teaching and having authority over their husbands. This would be in keeping with Ephesians 5:22-24: Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Some would even include this passage as cultural accommodation and therefore no longer binding on Christians.<sup>5</sup>



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<sup>4</sup>Craig Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), p. 610.



On the side of those who believe women should not be pastors or elders there are two major views: 1) One view prohibits women from teaching men at all as well as having any kind of authority over them. Our passage in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 not only says women can not have authority over men, it also says women cannot teach men. 1 Corinthians 14:33b-37 is also appealed to: As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

Those who believe woman should not be pastors or elders agree that some passages of Scripture are cultural accommodations. Most would agree that the prohibition of wearing jewelry is a cultural accommodation. Most would agree that the command to greet each other with a kiss is a cultural accommodation (2 Corinthians 13:12). They would disagree that 1 Timothy 2:11-14 is a cultural accommodation because of the specific statements made in the passage and the wider

context of the whole Bible. If the Bible approves of a practice in one place but disapproves of it in another it might be that it is a cultural accommodation in one of the passages (i.e. wearing jewelry). But if the Bible always disapproves of a practice, then it is not wise to call it cultural accommodation (e.g., homosexuality).

The specific statements on women's submission to men in the church in 1 Timothy appeal to the Creation and the Fall as proof of the prohibition. Paul first says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve." Here it is not just because Eve was the first to sin, but rather because this was God's original plan for humans. Douglas Moo says:

"For by rooting these prohibitions in the circumstances of creation rather than in the circumstances of the fall, Paul shows that he does not consider these restrictions to be the product of the curse and presumably, therefore, to be phased out by redemption. And by citing creation rather than a local situation or cultural circumstance as his basis for the prohibitions, Paul makes it clear that, while these local or cultural issues may have provided the context of the issue, they do not provide the reason for his advice. His reason for the prohibitions of verse 12 is the created role relationship of man and woman, and we may justly conclude that these prohibitions are applicable as long as this reason remains true."<sup>6</sup>



This idea of male headship is also found in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” This passage goes beyond the husband wife submission and indicates that in God’s plan men are to have authority over women. This does not mean that women are inferior to men. The passage just cited says God is the head of Christ, which certainly cannot mean Jesus is inferior to the Father - it simply means that in God’s economy there is an order, even in the Godhead. Interestingly, Romans 5:12 states that “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned.” As we will see in the 1 Timothy passage, the woman was the first to sin, in agreement with Genesis 3, but the man was the one ultimately blamed. The modern view stating women can be pastors and elders simply has no explanation for the blame to be put on Adam rather than Eve. The original plan of male authority from God gives the answer.

1 Timothy 2:14 also appeals to the fact that “the woman was deceived” and not the man. This is certainly no boast on man’s part because it indicates he sinned fully knowing what he was doing. Some say this passage indicates that there is something about women and their more acute vulnerability to being deceived which makes them disqualified to be a leader in spiritual matters. 1 Peter 3:7 calls wives the “weaker partner.” Men and women are certainly different. They are not only different in physical strength but also in other ways. As a general rule, women tend to be more feelings oriented and men tend to be more rationally oriented. This could be due to the biological clock that causes hormonal changes on a regular basis in women. These hormonal changes can make women more in touch with their feelings, but more emotionally based than men. This is not a bad thing and can be a tremendous help in the decision-making processes we face, but it should not be the leading part of the decision-making process. If this is true, then women should have a part in contributing ideas to leadership in the church but should not be an authority themselves.

The passage cited earlier in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 specifically says it is a prohibition in “all the congregations of the saints”, not just some local situation. Paul then appeals to his leadership as an Apostle in making this prohibition. The specifics of these passages seem to teach that they are not just cultural accommodations, but rather universally binding prohibitions.

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5 R.E.O. White, *Biblical Ethics* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp. 171-173.

6 John Piper and Wayne Grudem, editors, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, Internet chapter 9, p. 14.





Those who do not believe women should be pastors or elders or even teachers also appeal to the wider context of the Bible. Isaiah 3:12 says, "Youths oppress my people, women rule over them. O my people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path." Here women leadership is seen as a curse and a mockery. Many appeal to the Old Testament example of Deborah as a judge of Israel to prove it is ok for women to lead men. But this was in a time of Israel's history when "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25). Even Deborah recognized it was not right for her to be leader and appealed to Barak to take the lead (Judges chapter 4). The reason women in leadership is an issue today is because the church has accommodated to the world by being influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement, not by the clear teaching of Scripture.

2) A second position within the camp of those who believe it is wrong for women to be pastors or elders are those who believe it is acceptable for women to teach, just not as a pastor or elder in an authoritative role. They would say that the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 is a type of hendiadys. In other words, "to teach or to have authority over a man" is emphasizing the principle that women should not have authority over a man. The teaching as an authority such as pastor or elder is what is prohibited, not all teaching in general. They say this because in Paul's letters he did allow women to teach men. The British Worldwide News points out several instances where women are allowed to teach men:

*Can women teach men? We have seen biblical examples of women teaching men, both in private and in public. It was not wrong for Deborah to tell men the word of the Lord. It was not wrong for Huldah to give authoritative information to the high priest. It was not wrong for Anna to publicly speak about Jesus "to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2L38). These are all forms of teaching.*

*It was not wrong for Rhoda to tell everyone that Peter was at the door (Acts 12:14). It was not wrong for women to relay commands to men (Matthew 28:10). It was not wrong for women to tell the apostles that the Lord had risen (verse 7). They were relaying spiritually significant information to the men, and Jesus wanted the men to learn from the women.*


*It was not wrong for the Samaritan woman to tell people what Jesus had done (John 4:29). It was not wrong for Priscilla and Aquila to work together to teach Apollos (Acts 18:26). It was not wrong for Philip's daughters (Acts 21:8-9) to tell their inspired messages to men.*

*It was not wrong for a woman to teach her husband by example (1 Peter 3:1-2). We also see in Scripture it is sometimes appropriate for a woman to teach with words, as well.*

*It is not wrong for a woman to give an answer if a man asks a reason for the hope within her (verse 15). It is not wrong for a woman to prophesy edifying words during church services (1 Corinthians 11:4-16). When Paul told the Colossians to teach each other (Colossians 3:16), he did not mention any sex restrictions.*







*Obviously, Paul is not saying that it is always wrong for a woman to say anything that a man might learn something from. Nevertheless, 1 Timothy 2:12 says that he did not allow a woman to teach a man. The context is the church, and yet we have already seen that Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in the Corinthian church. To avoid interpreting Paul in such a way as to make him contradict himself, we conclude that Paul allowed certain forms of teaching, but not others.<sup>7</sup>*

Paul allowed teaching from women, just so long as it was not from the authoritative role of pastor or elder. Women like Joni Erickson Tada or Beth Moore can even preach in a church service without fearing that God is against her.

Reviewing all the data it seems that Paul's prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:11-14 and 1 Corinthians 14: 33-36 cannot be seen as a culturally bound prohibition and so it must be authoritative today. Since Paul did allow women to teach and speak in church the prohibition cannot be for all types of teaching. With this understanding the best interpretation of the Scripture is that it prohibits women from being pastors or elders over men, but it does not prohibit their teaching men.

*We can conclude that Paul did not allow women to be elders or to exercise the teaching, ruling and rebuking functions restricted to elders.*

*Also, men and women are of equal value (Galatians 3:28; 1 Peter 3:7). But men and women can have different roles in the church without denying equal value.<sup>8</sup>*

We should seriously consider the cultural and historical background of our question. Since most of the Church throughout history has read the passages above with the belief that they refer to male headship in the church, and only recently has the historical interpretation been questioned, is it more likely that the world, which calls for a rejection of any male dominated roles is correct in their interpretation of the passages and the Church throughout history is incorrect? When new interpretations or doctrines are "discovered" that go against 2000 years of interpretation, we should at least question the new interpretation.

All four positions have some good arguments, so charity must be given to those who disagree. This issue should never be one that leads to division, in a church or a denomination. However, the fourth position seems to be the best when all the Biblical data is analyzed. As a side note, a woman who has an authoritative role over a group of people that are not men can also be considered a pastor (e.g., women's pastor or children's pastor). They have a pastoral role and are not over men so the prohibition in 1 Timothy does not apply.

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<sup>7</sup> British World News - July 1997: Men, Women and Ministry: Part II (Internet: [www.wcg.org](http://www.wcg.org)), pp. 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

